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## Guest Opinion: State's priority is disease-free status

**F**ew issues have been as contentious to Montanans as bison management near Yellowstone National Park. Gov. Brian Schweitzer has taken on this issue not because it is a political winner, or because he has a quick fix in mind, but because a sustainable solution is long overdue.

We must protect Montana's brucellosis-free status. Both the governor and I have been involved in the cattle industry for many years. We understand the disease and the necessity of remaining brucellosis-free.

The park is the last reservoir of brucellosis in the nation. Montana has gone to great lengths to eradicate brucellosis. However, recently Idaho and Wyoming lost their brucellosis-free status, and it may be simply a matter of time before Montana loses its status. Contradictory policies at the federal departments of agriculture and interior have been less than helpful.

In the late 1980s, Montana culled buffalo through a mismanaged hunt. Subsequent management led to legal actions, and a settlement was negotiated with federal agencies that resulted in the current Interagency Bison Management Plan. When it was written in the year 2000, about 2,500 bison occupied the park. That number recently grew to 4,900, and still the federal government has no plan for long-term bison management.

The IBMP establishes zones where bison may roam outside the park, and designates hazing, capture, and test and slaughter as management tools. This system costs taxpayers almost a million dollars each year. The IBMP also calls for eradication of brucellosis, but no tools to actually eradicate it. The IBMP is supposed to manage risk by ensuring infected bison don't occupy the same ground as cattle. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon for bison to move many miles into Montana overnight and commingle with cattle.

### Countering misinformation

Some have contributed to the debate through speculation and misinformation. Here are the facts:

- The IBMP does not assure Montana's brucellosis-free status. USDA's actions in Wyoming and Idaho demonstrate that Montana will lose its status if only two herds are found to be infected. Loss of status is caused by infection, not a signed document.
- A few hundred cattle occupy the area near the park. Most reside there for a few months

each summer. Do we continue to allow these cattle to jeopardize the status of Montana's remaining 2 million head?

- There is no "camel's nose under the tent" for grazing on public land. We have spoken only of a few private lands.
- Landowners would not be required to give up rights. Neither "eminent domain" nor "condemnation" has been suggested.
- The area where bison may wander would not increase. Instead, geography would be better utilized to control bison, beyond which a "drop dead" zone would exist. Each spring, bison would still be moved back into the park.
- Hunting will not be used to replace bison population control measures. However, it is an important tool for bison management. Montana's hunt last year was successful, and hunting can be used even more effectively over time.

Some call for the simple eradication of brucellosis. No one disagrees. Eradication is a goal shared by everyone -- but how, without a realistic eradication plan? Only the federal government could develop and implement such a plan in the park. In the meantime, we must manage risk. The IBMP does not.

### **Veterinarians' concern**

State veterinarians in 19 Western states agree with the need for action. They recently called for reducing bison-cattle contact through spatial and temporal separation, quarantine measures if commingling occurs, and possible additional sanctions on the three states.

Recently, the governor and I met with affected landowners near the park. We suggested ideas for maintaining better separation of cattle and bison. One option is the establishment of a special management area for stricter protocols on the cattle near the park. Another option is to negotiate leases allowing only grazing of non-ruminants until brucellosis is eradicated. Whatever the mechanism, the state would provide fair-plus compensation.

As the governor has proposed ideas, he has invited others to do the same. We will continue to work with the livestock industry and all interested parties to protect Montana's brucellosis-free status through true risk management, while managing bison in a reasonable manner.

*Bill Hedstrom, a Kalispell dairy farmer, was appointed chairman of the Montana Board of Livestock by Gov. Brian Schweitzer.*